2007-04454/

Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Farm and Food Report is produced weekly by Zapwell Communications Group for Communications Branch, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food
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FEEDLOT MANAGEMENT SCHOOL FILLING UP FAST

The 11th annual Western Canada Feedlot Management School at the University of Saskatchewan is expected to be the 11th consecutive sell-out of the four-day seminar.

This year's school will be held July 30 through August 2 in Saskatoon. Enrolment is limited to 45 students, and organizer Dr. John McKinnon says there is always a diversity of people in attendance.

"We have had people from grain farmers with very little animal experience right through to the owner of one of the largest feedlots in Canada," McKinnon said. "In some cases, it is producers wanting to [expand] their cow-calf operations … with backgrounding operations; in others, it is owners and their employees looking to expand their skills. Every year, we also have some graduate students from the university that take the course to gain more practical experience in the work they do in their studies."

The school is a joint project of Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, the Saskatchewan Cattle Feeders Association and the University of Saskatchewan.

The industry-government-university combination allows the school to draw from a wide array of expertise, and also allows it to focus on what producers really need, McKinnon explained.

The feedlot management school curriculum is broken into two core areas. The first two days focus on business and marketing, and the final two days focus on issues surrounding the management of feedlot cattle.

"We have industry experts, those involved in the marketing business, and economists making presentations on key topics [such as] … how to market cattle, how to effectively control costs and how to guard against some of the risks involved in feeding cattle," McKinnon noted.

"Then we get into areas such as nutrition, animal health and the tours that take us to feedlots, where we see how the topics discussed are being applied hands-on on a day-to-day basis."

If participants are unable to commit for the full four days, each two-day session can also be taken as a stand-alone course.

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This year's field tours will take the class to the Goldenhill Cattle Company in Viscount, which has a capacity of approximately 20,000 head, and to the feedlot and packing plant operated by Natural Valley Farms in Neudorf.

McKinnon says the entire school is oriented towards providing participants with hands-on experience.

"In the business and marketing sessions, we may have a lecture, but then we'll move to our computer room and run market simulation programs that allow producers to get a feel for how the market changes," he said. "We've expanded our tours to give a more practical aspect to the classroom work that is conducted on-site."

The Western Canada Feedlot Management School is offered at a cost of $200 for either of the two-day sessions, or $350 for all four days. The registration fee includes course materials, some meals and tour transportation.

A full agenda and registration form are available at www.saskcattle.com, or by contacting Dr. John McKinnon at (306) 966-4137 or Sandy Russell with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food at (306) 933-5570.

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ON-FARM FOOD SAFETY A TOP PRIORITY FOR SASKATCHEWAN RESEARCHER

Dr. Sarah Parker's primary goal is identifying practical on-farm food safety practices for Saskatchewan producers. Raised and educated in Prince Albert and Saskatoon, she has always been happy to call the province her home.

"I chose research and to start my career in Saskatchewan because I like it here. I like the fact that the countryside is wide, and enjoy both the summer and the winter," she said.

"Saskatchewan is a province that has a nice casual feel to it, yet people are generally practical and like to get things done."

Parker received her post-secondary education at the University of Saskatchewan. There, she completed her undergraduate degree in biology with honours, then went on to complete her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM), as well as her Master's of Veterinary Science in Epidemiology.

Parker has always been interested in both biology and numbers. She went through her undergraduate degree looking at plants and animals, then moved to veterinary medicine because it was a problem-solving field that also involved biology. She went back to university after her DVM to study epidemiology, since her interests included looking at why and how events happen in populations.

She began her career at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) Centre for Animal Parasitology, a diagnostic test and research laboratory, and expanded from animal health diagnostic issues into food safety diagnostic issues. Then her career took off in a different direction.

Two years ago, Parker was hired as the Saskatchewan Research Chair in On-Farm and Food Safety under the Strategic Research Program (SRP), an initiative funded and administered by Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food.

Parker now works at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine to increase the understanding of pathogen biology and control points, as well as to provide an increased understanding of potential controls for biological and chemical hazards, both on-farm and post-slaughter.

(more)

Parker says that a key part of her research is focused on developing control systems that will achieve food safety standards.

"In food safety, for example, there are lots of [intervention points at which] the current food safety practices [could be enhanced]", she stated. "Some of those [enhancements] might include testing and helping the public deal with food properly in order to avoid cross-contamination problems, or managing control systems in the slaughter or processing plants to improve the product."

Although there are standards that all products made available to the public must meet, Parker notes that consumers are continually seeking increased assurance of food safety. "Every-day producers are under pressure to enhance their operations and to communicate their efforts. Making sure food is produced safely is always a top priority," she observed.

"Since producers are being asked this, I think it's important that I research where there is an actual need for updated practices, and try to find ways in which implementation would be successful. Hopefully, this research will help them find the most practical approaches to make improvements."

As a researcher in on-farm and food safety, Parker says that producers are never far removed from her work. "Producers should expect that researchers are available both to help interpret the work that is being done, and also to look at what producers might want done, who might do it and what research might need to be done in order to put the initiative into place."

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PROPER HAY CONDITIONING GETS BEST BALES

The dog days of summer are usually the time of year when livestock producers turn their attention to cutting and baling the feed that will nourish their herds through the winter months.

There are a lot of factors that can influence the quality of livestock feed, but one of the more important aspects is hay conditioning.

According to Glenn Barclay, a forage development specialist with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, hay conditioning is a mechanical treatment that helps forage dry more quickly. "It allows moisture to escape from the stem faster, so that the stem will dry at nearly the same rate as the leaves, allowing baling to start sooner," Barclay said.

Research conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture has shown that properly set conditioning rolls can reduce the drying time of the first cutting by 80 per cent as compared to using only a sickle bar mower. In about one hour, moisture will begin to escape from stems and the results of conditioning will start to show.

Crimping (breaking or bending the stem) and crushing (splitting the stem longitudinally) are two of the most common methods of hay conditioning. The crushing and crimping techniques are most effective on crops with a thick stem and a low leaf-to-stem ratio, such as first-cut alfalfa.

According to researchers at Purdue University in Indiana, the goal for conditioning alfalfa is to have 90 per cent of the crop stem showing some signs of either being cracked or crimped. No more than five per cent of the leaves should be separated from the plant, show signs of bruising, or be blackened from conditioning.

"A good haying operation may be able to retain 60 per cent or more of the alfalfa leaves," Barclay noted. "Over two-thirds of alfalfa's protein is contained in the leaves, which are also especially high in vitamins."

(more)

Barclay points out that there are a variety of conditioners on the market. Regardless of the model selected, however, he says that many farmers check or adjust their conditioners far too infrequently after they are purchased and brought home. For example, a recent American survey found that only 54 per cent of conditioner owners adjusted their machines annually, and 26 per cent never adjusted them at all.

"The conditioning roll gap and tension are the two most important items to check and re-adjust with each harvest," Barclay said, adding that the owner's manual is generally the best place to check for proper settings.

In alfalfa fields, roll clearance should be slightly smaller than the alfalfa stems. This usually means setting the clearance at 1.6 to 2.4 millimetres (1/16 to 3/32 of an inch). Too large a gap will result in under-conditioning, while rolls that touch will wear prematurely and unevenly.

"Ideally, the roll gap should be about the size of the diameter of the lower stems of the alfalfa being cut," he stated. "An operator can check the roll gap of a conditioner by taking a typical plant from the hay stand and trying to pass the stem through the roll gap in about four or five places. If it doesn't get caught, the roll gap is too large. Ideally, the stem should bend a bit, then go through the gap."

Barclay says that most industry experts feel the top operators are those who adjust their conditioners for each field. Adjusting a conditioner only once or twice a season will not get the full benefits of the machine.

"Alfalfa stem diameter, plant moisture levels and maturity levels change from field to field," he noted. "Stems will vary in size depending on yield, age of the stand and plant density. As a stand gets older, the stems are usually larger, while in younger stands, they tend to be smaller."

Barclay says that hay conditioning can seem like more of an art than a science for many producers, but with practice, they often gain a good sense of what needs to be done and when. "Conditioning over-ripe fields will accomplish very little. Under-conditioning may necessitate raking, which increases potential leaf loss; over-conditioning increases losses because the leaves dry too fast."

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PRODUCERS ENCOURAGED TO PLAN AHEAD FOR MARKETING CATTLE

Cattle feeders and cow-calf producers were hurt by the rapid increase in feed grain prices during the final quarter of 2006. Price volatility and market uncertainty are prevailing conditions in 2007, and Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) is encouraging beef producers to start planning their cattle marketing now.

"Canadian dollar appreciation, potential interest rate increases, seasonal fluctuations in beef demand and continued volatility in feed grain prices are some of the factors that will influence the market prices producers receive for feeder and finished cattle in 2007," said Grant Zalinko, SAF Beef Consultant for Feedlots.

Zalinko says cow-calf producers should start talking with cattle buyers now, and focus their marketing plans on selling the right animals at the right time. "The market is always correct with respect to price, despite what we might think," he stated. "Prudent marketing is essentially learning what is in demand and when."

Vaccination programs and verified beef production, including age verification, are positive attributes that can add value to your beef cattle. "It will be the marketplace that determines how much of a price premium you might receive, but producers should realize that value and price are not necessarily the same," Zalinko added.

Cow-calf producers who have surplus forage and adequate feeding equipment and facilities may want to feed their smaller calves to generate more income. Producers are encouraged to contact their local SAF livestock development specialist or call the SAF Agriculture Knowledge Centre at 1-866-457-2377 to evaluate marketing alternatives and to obtain production advice.

Retaining ownership of calves through custom feeding agreements is another option available to producers. However, producers who are considering retaining ownership of their animals should contact custom feedlots early, as pen space is expected to be fully utilized.

The Saskatchewan Cattle Feeders Association maintains a listing of custom feedlots. They can be contacted at (306) 382-2333.

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Zalinko says the best advice producers can follow is to plan ahead. "Develop a written cattle marketing plan in accordance with your cash flow projections and available feed resources, and then stick to it," he stated.

"If a market rally develops, you can always sell into it."

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AN $80-MILLION INVESTMENT IN SASKATCHEWAN'S FUTURE

The Government of Saskatchewan recently announced that it was investing up to $80 million to assist producers and communities in the construction and expansion of transportation ethanol or biodiesel (biofuels) production facilities in Saskatchewan.

As a result of the province's interest in further developing the bio-fuels industry, the Saskatchewan Biofuels Investment Opportunity (SaskBIO) Program was born.

SaskBIO's timeframe is set to span four years and provide repayable contributions of up to $10 million per project. An additional $2 million per year will also be provided for biofuels and bio-products research and development.

"We were the first province in the country to mandate ethanol use, and we took the lead on the production of biofuels several years ago," said Ken Magnus, Manager of Strategic Projects with Saskatchewan Regional Economic and Co-operative Development. "Now that the provincial industry is producing enough ethanol to meet our 7.5-per-cent-blend provincial mandate, the next phase—SaskBIO—is to help producers expand into the national market."

Magnus says momentum has been building for biofuel use on a national basis. "Hopefully there will be a mandate or standard for biofuels on a national scale in the near future."

It is felt that the industry has tremendous growth potential to supply provincial, national and export sales. "We want to keep our eye on the ball to make sure that we have the opportunity for Saskatchewan's production to fill the void that now exists," Magnus stated.

SaskBIO was created to provide an opportunity for farmers and communities to participate in the value-added biofuels industry in Saskatchewan through investment ownership in biofuel facilities.

Furthermore, the program will ensure that Saskatchewan is an attractive jurisdiction in which to build a sustainable biofuels industry.

(more)

Corporations, individuals or partnerships are eligible to apply for funding. However, applicants must meet a couple of requirements. First, applicants must have a minimum of five per cent farmer/community investment. Second, the minimum annual production capacity of a new facility, or the increased capacity of an existing facility, must be at least two million litres per year.

"One of SaskBIO's goals is to create a situation where a higher level of local ownership becomes an incentive to access the program," Magnus said. "Therefore, production facilities will be owned by Saskatchewan people."

The expansion of the biofuels industry in Saskatchewan is expected to create more jobs and economic spin-offs, develop new markets for agricultural producers, decrease impact on the environment, and create new opportunities for the provincial research community.

Magnus adds that these benefits will extend well beyond the farm gate. "The province's target is to be producing one billion litres of ethanol and 400 million litres of biodiesel per year by 2015. If we can achieve that goal, it will certainly be a huge boost for the economy, generating both urban and rural opportunities province-wide," he said.

Magnus believes this is a unique opportunity where Saskatchewan is in the right place at the right time. "If you look at what is going on globally, production of renewable fuels is real and it is on. Here we have almost half of the arable land in the country. Therefore, we produce nearly half of the feedstock for biofuels, mostly wheat and canola," he stated.

"So if Saskatchewan has an opportunity to be a player in that marketplace, which we certainly do because of our natural advantages, we should take advantage of it. Whether it is an ethanol plant or a widget factory, any time you end up with an industry that grows in your province and that will exceed a billion dollars worth of investment, that's a good thing."

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